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William Tyndale & the Analogy of Scripture

William Tyndale (1492-1536) was an English Reformer and translator of the Bible. He was the first to translate the Bible into English directly from the Greek and Hebrew. Tyndale, a student of both Oxford and Cambridge, was an erudite scholar, fluent in seven languages, and exceptionally learned in the Scriptures. Though he was a first rate academic, Tyndale's real passion was for Christian laymen. Hence, his famous rebuke of a certain clergyman, "If God spares my life, before many years pass I will make it possible for a boy behind the plow to know more Scripture than you do".

When Tyndale realized that much of England was ignorant of the Scriptures, he became zealous to make the Scriptures as widely known as possible. To that end, he published the first printed New Testament in the English language in 1526. Not only did Tyndale want people to have access to the Bible, but he also wanted them to read and understand it. Therefore, in the preface of his New Testament he offered instructions for reading and understanding God's Word. Here is one of William Tyndale's instructions:

Mark the plain and manifest places of the Scriptures, and in doubtful places see thou add no interpretation contrary to them; but (as Paul saith) let all be conformable and agreeing to the faith.

Tyndale referenced the ancient hermeneutical principle called the analogia Scriptura, or the analogy of Scripture. It means that the best interpreter of Scripture is Scripture, because Scripture always agrees with Scripture. The noble Bereans employed this rule when they compared Paul's teaching with other Scripture (Acts 17:11). Our Confession affirms the same truth. It says:

The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly (WCF 1.9).

The reasoning is as follows. God is consistent and free from contradiction. The Bible is God's Word. Therefore, the Bible is consistent and free from contradiction. It follows from this that no teaching of Scripture contradicts any another teaching of Scripture. The correct interpretation of any passage of Scripture is that interpretation which agrees with every other related passage of Scripture.

Our goal then, in interpreting Scripture, is to compare Scripture with Scripture. If we arrive at an interpretation that appears to contradict another teaching of Scripture, we are wrong in our understanding of at least one of them. Our interpretations of Scripture may not always agree, but the Scriptures themselves always agree. Therefore, we must strive to interpret the Scriptures in a way that is consistent with all of Scripture. Likewise, we must interpret less clear Scripture in light of more clear Scripture. In other words, we do not build our doctrines on obscure or unclear verses. Instead, we give priority to the more clear and obvious teaching.

The more acquainted we are with all of Scripture, the better equipped we are to understand any Scripture. Praise God for William Tyndale's labors, which make it possible for us all to know more Scripture!